



Companion Animal Behavioural Services

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Submission to the Parliamentary Petitions Committee's Enquiry on Fireworks

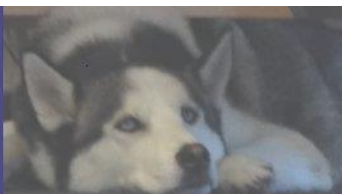
March 1st, 2019

The use of fireworks is no longer confined to a few hours in November, but has expanded exponentially as the population in the UK has become more diverse and more events are celebrated both formally and informally. In addition, outdoor events such as concerts have become more prevalent and often end with noisy firework displays.

Fireworks can and do cause considerable distress and harm to people and animals. Thinly stretched emergency services do not need the additional burden of dealing with fire and injury caused by accidents and deliberate use of fireworks with malicious intent, as evidenced in the national crime statistics and reported attacks on emergency service workers.

Animal owners and keepers do not need the burden of worrying whether their premises will be safe from fire triggered by stray missiles (including Chinese lanterns) and needing to keep their animals protected from the often severe distress that firework noise causes. There is increasing concern for people suffering from cognitive impairment who can be very distressed and confused by, to them, inexplicable noise and it goes without saying that it adds to the burden of suffering of people with PTSD.

Firework noise can be particularly distressing in urban areas where the built environment magnifies loud bangs and screeches and noise volumes from other sources are already high. High humidity transmits sound waves more efficiently and temperature inversions in the atmosphere can increase the blast wave significantly and cause a cumulative build-up of noise, especially in areas suffering from the heat





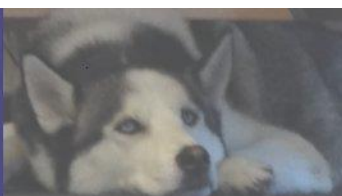
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island effect. This means that fireworks can sound louder or softer from one night to the next, and the reverberation of buildings can affect the loudness of the sound. Multiple blasts can also make the fireworks sound louder, and fireworks that explode nearer the ground can sound louder than more powerful explosions from higher missiles. Action on Hearing Loss found that, although fireworks sold in the UK to the public should not exceed 120 dB, those used in public displays averaged 150 dB. The human pain threshold is considered to be 120dB, although of course distress can be caused at much lower levels. Noise levels as low as 80 dB are capable of damaging hearing and it is not possible to control proximity to fireworks set off by the general public. In an increasingly sleep-deprived culture, fireworks let off with no regard to the largely unenforced, and perhaps unenforceable, current legislation can ruin a decent night's sleep.

As a canine and feline behaviourist and someone who works with horses, I often deal with the distress caused to clients and companion animals by fireworks. However research by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association and the University of Liverpool into firework phobias show that many more seek no help at all. Some resort to drugging their animals for long periods - an ineffective method for coping with the problem - and in itself, a welfare issue. Firework noise can be more or less nightly between the end of October and new year, but frequently occurs during other times of the year as well. An estimated 45% of dogs show signs of fear when they hear fireworks and frequently injure themselves in the futile attempt to get away from the noise and the flashes that are all around them. Both cats and dogs may flee in terror and cause injury and even death to themselves and others or add to the burden of strays already faced by local authorities. There are an estimated 840,000 horses in the UK, concentrated, perhaps surprisingly, in urban areas (Boden et al 2012). Although I live just 6 miles from the Houses of Parliament, I am within 3 miles of 2 farms with herds of cattle, 2 miles of 2 riding stables and 4 miles of equine grazing. There are also numerous city farms housing animals vulnerable to the effects of fireworks. The extent of suffering and distress caused to urban and rural wildlife as well as livestock is immeasurable but possibly considerable, including for vulnerable native species. A study in the Netherlands (Shamoun-Baranes et al 2011)





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found that thousands of birds took flight from wetlands and grasslands due to firework noise, many dying from acute physiological stress or physical trauma caused by hitting objects in their panic. The RSPCA received a 34% increase in calls from people concerned about the effect of fireworks on animals in the UK in the six year period up to 2015.

Current legislation is ineffective and possibly unenforceable. Curfews are routinely ignored and difficult, if not impossible, to police. Cuts in police forces mean that anti-social behaviour of many kinds is on the rise and it is unlikely that policing illegal use of fireworks will be considered to be a priority. 25% of the population owns a dog or a cat and there has been considerable pressure for several years to amend the current legislation. It is not a minority issue and the effect is not only on animals. Ian Hopkins, Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police called for a ban on the sale of fireworks to the public in October last year, stating that "The answer cannot be that more firefighters and more police officers turn up to deal with this and people are scared to go out of their homes."

The distress and danger caused by the general public being able to purchase and handle fireworks and the unnecessary demands placed on emergency services could be eliminated by restricting firework sale and use to licensed organisations hosting public displays only. In addition, it should be mandatory to use "quiet" fireworks, excluding rockets and fireworks that emit screeching whistles, and limits should be set on the calibre of shell that can be used. There are several companies in the UK that specialise in organising this type of display and precedents have been set in other municipalities, notably Collecchio in the province of Parma, Italy. Mandatory notification of permission to hold a firework display would then enable the general public to anticipate potential distress and take appropriate measures. It would be a simple matter for the gov.uk website to carry lists of permissions granted and links to other sources of information for help in mitigating the effects.





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People who enjoy fireworks could then attend public displays in the knowledge that they are relatively safe and that fireworks would be less likely to get into the hands of people with ill-intent. Fireworks would also be removed from residential properties with less likelihood of disruption to those who do not wish to have the display inflicted upon them. The granting of permission for a licensed display should be contingent on the proximity of nearby vulnerable premises and people and local wildlife and have strict time limits as to the duration and lateness of the display.

Today is the anniversary of the death of my collie-shepherd, Maly. Although he lived to an advanced age, he had spent his first 11 years with an owner suffering domestic abuse and was, in any case, temperamentally noise-sensitive. It took me three long years of patient work to desensitise him to fireworks and gun shots. I was eventually able to walk him past a stand of guns but not before he suffered a great deal of trauma from frequent, unpredictable fireworks. At home, I could take measures to help him but, when out and about, it was heart breaking to witness his distress and not always easy to get him to a quieter place.

I lost my next dog four months ago, also in old age. Although he had also come from an abusing owner and spent his first 3½ years in distress, he was “bombproof”, partly as a consequence of his breed and partly his new environment and training; very little bothered him in terms of noise. I considered myself extremely fortunate in not having to cope with the trauma of firework season, but I knew that I was in a minority.

I would like to see a ban on sales of fireworks to the public and further restrictions placed on public displays. What a fitting memorial it would be to my two wonderful dogs and it would enable me to be safe in the knowledge that it won't be a problem for my forthcoming puppy, not to mention the animals owned by my clients.





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Boden LA et al (2012) *Summary of current knowledge of the size and spatial distribution of the horse population within Great Britain*, BMC Veterinary Research, V28(43)

Shamoun-Baranes J et al (2011) *Birds flee en masse from New Year's Eve fireworks*, Behavioural Ecology, V22(6), pp 1173–1177

